

Drills help water rescuers, divers swim clear of dangers

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DEER CREEK RESERVOIR—

When Ogden resident Peggy Wilson waded into water up to her shoulders to rescue a baby from a submerged pickup recently in Orem, she was surprised to find she couldn't break the truck's window.

She didn't have enough power behind her punches.

Her husband, Lance Wilson, had better luck. He put the power of his 6-foot 4-inch, 240-pound frame behind his swing and smashed the glass.

He was surprised to find how sharp the shattered shards were. He cut his hands reaching inside and again as he lifted the baby out.

The Wilsons were unwittingly cast into the role of water rescuers a month ago in Orem after a busy father left his 3-month-old son in his truck while he ran an errand. The truck slipped out of gear and rolled into the canal that runs adjacent to the Technology and Research Park in north Orem.

The Wilsons, on their way to dinner, became the rescue team. They will be given heroism awards Friday in recognition of their efforts.

"That's a heart-warming story, but we don't want to be surprised when we do a water rescue," said

Chris Johnson, spokesman for the Utah County Sheriff's Search and Rescue team as they trained at Deer Creek Reservoir.

"It really is a big deal going underwater to make a rescue or recovery attempt. There are all kinds of entrapments," Johnson said.

"That's why the divers always dive in pairs, we monitor the depth rate and we assign a safety diver just to stand by in case something unexpected occurs."

In water rescue and recovery, the unexpected is the expected, Johnson said.

Not only are the divers working with poor visibility, especially in shallow waters like those of Utah Lake, and in cold temperatures, they are usually working at night or in less than ideal conditions.

The "target" is usually sinking and always moving as the currents pull a submerged vehicle along.

Sometimes the car or truck sinks quickly, and other times an air pocket will delay it as well as provide some extra time for victims inside.

There's often a time stress although Johnson said the estimated time for a good rescue is between four and six minutes. "Unfortunately, we do more

recoveries than rescues," he said.

Volunteers on the Search and Rescue Team practice deep and shallow water rescue and recovery at least a half dozen times a year, including ice dives in the winter.

"It's so different to actually get into the water," Johnson said. "You have the pressure of the water to deal with and the movement, and it's easy to get trapped."

Diving instructor Dirk Palfreyman said it's critical to remember there are all kinds of traps in an unstable underwater vehicle.

"It's very, very difficult to get in and get out with scuba gear." Add in lifting a victim onto a stretcher board and the problems increase exponentially. Whatever the divers do, they must place their own safety first.

"Sometimes, as in the recent

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Utah County search and rescue team members tow a truck into Deer Creek Reservoir as part of training exercises.

drowning of the young man in Payson Lake, the family is hysterical and want things rushed. We don't rush," Johnson said. "It sounds kind of heartless, but we're our

own first priority. We have to be," Johnson said many people who get into trouble in the water are disregarding a couple of important safety considerations.

They don't dress warmly enough for the cold water and underestimate the dangers.

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